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# Chapter 1:

## Introduction: Causes of Corruption – The Right Question or the Right Perspective?

*Gjalt de Graaf, Patrick von Maravic, and Pieter Wagenaar*

### 1. Introduction

What causes corruption? Although no one would dispute how difficult that is to answer, the question is perfectly clear. Isn't it? Well... no. *The Good Cause* is more about the *question* than an attempt to answer it.

A first difficulty is defining the explanandum. What do we mean by corruption? In our daily language and across the many academic disciplines that study corruption, the definitions are numerous. The norms defining what corruption is (or integrity for that matter) vary across both societies and academic disciplines.

But more than the concept of corruption is troublesome to the question. As stated by Caiden, Dwivedi, and Jabbra (2001: 21), '[j]ust as there are many varieties of corrupt behavior, so there are multitudinous factors contributing to corruption (...) So many explanations are offered that it is difficult to classify them in any systematic manner.' Heywood (1997: 426) adds that '[t]he complexity of the phenomenon makes it impossible to provide a comprehensive account of the causes of political corruption'. Caiden, Dwivedi, and Jabbra (2001: 21-26) list sources of corruption as psychological, ideological, external, economic, political, socio-cultural, and technological. But factors that contribute to corruption are, of course, not *causes* of corruption. 'In sum, corruption can be attributed to almost anything (...). But while the opportunities exist everywhere, the degree of corruption varies widely among individuals, public agencies, administrative cultures, and geographic regions' (Caiden/Dwivedi/Jabbra 2001: 26). Fijnaut and Huberts remark: 'Research shows that a conglomerate of social, economic, political, organizational and individual causal factors are important to explain cases of public corruption' (2002: 8).

More than corruption's multiple factors make the question difficult: there is also disagreement on what constitutes cause in scientific theory (see Gerrig 2005; Tilly 2000). We can think, for example, of a well-known, clear corruption case and ask, *why* did it occur? To answer, we would first have to ask *what* we want to know. Do we mean, why did the case start? If so, we are looking for the immediate causes and circumstances of the corrupt transac-

tions and decisions, the corrupt acts themselves. Or do we want to know why the case continued over a period of time and in connection with other cases? If so, we are more interested in why a specific official had the readiness to become corrupt. Perhaps we want to know why this particular corruption case occurred rather than not. Were there alternatives for the corrupt official(s), or were they in some way forced to do what they did? Was corruption, given the causes and conditions, their only course of action? This raises the debate on determinism versus free will. Maybe we are looking for the causes of the particular case of corruption, the issue that gets most attention in corruption research. In this context, are we interested in the causes external to the corrupt act itself? The first is the most popular in the literature – not surprisingly, since social sciences usually deal with concepts (see for example Geddes 2003; Gerring 2001; Moses/Knutsen 2007) rather than processes and thus ‘freeze’ reality (Schinkel 2004: 8). Corruption is then studied in an abstract sense, looking for the governing laws of corruption at a micro, meso or macro level. Another possible interpretation of the *why* question is: are you interested in the reasons and motives for the official(s) to become corrupt? This brings us to an issue often raised in philosophy, that is, whether reasons for action can or should be seen as causes of action and, if so, in what sense can they be treated (Schinkel 2004: 8).

## 2. Causality and corruption

A core subject of social sciences is understanding causal relations and explaining ‘phenomena in the world of our experience’ (Hempel/Oppenheim 1948: 135), which means nothing more than answering one of the now famous ‘why’ question. The concept itself, however, is subject to debate and throughout the history of scientific discovery highly contested (Mackie 1985). Two fundamental positions seem to divide the issue. Positivists argue in the unitary or *logical deductivist* tradition of Hempel and Oppenheim: all causes need to be understood according to ‘general laws’, be a ‘logical consequence of the explanans’, and the explanans must be empirical in nature insofar as they can be tested or observed (Hempel/Oppenheim 1948: 137). Pluralists, on the other hand, challenge the view of ‘invariant universal[s]’ (Tilly 1995: 1597) laws and argue instead that different types of causes, which are not necessarily commensurable, exist (Gadenne 2001: 1562). For example, Mr. Adams, a senior civil servant, accepts a bribe because he is heavily in debt. But he could have taken the bribe in any case, so that owing a large sum of money was not necessary to acting in a corrupt manner. Multi-causality is normal rather than exceptional. As the least common denominator of a definition of cause, Gerring (2005: 169) suggests defining causes as ‘events or conditions that *raise the probability* of some outcome occurring’, which implies a *ceteris paribus* condition.

In the philosophy of causality, an epistemological and an ontological tradition can be distinguished (Schinkel 2004). In the first tradition, a cause is the coinciding of phenomena where, because the cause always precedes the consequence, a belief exists that there is a cause (Hume 1990/1739). This kind of causality cannot be found in any scientific theory on corruption, however, because no cause can be identified that *always* coincides with the consequence 'corruption'. This leads all too often to confuse correlation with causation. Causes identified in corruption research are not assumed always to lead to corruption. The so-called necessity criterion, often named as a criterion for causation (if A is the cause of B, B must occur when A occurs) is such a strong one that it is not used in corruption theories, which makes corruption studies not too different from other social analyses.

In the ontological tradition, causality is seen as something that actually happened. In social science this is often hard to identify, so neither is this very helpful in corruption research. For example, in what way does GNP or leadership exist, and how can it cause a particular corruption case? Bourdieu has warned against ascribing intrinsic aspects to social phenomena since it would amount to naturalizing something that is socially constructed (Schinkel 2004: 14). An often-noted and general problem for corruption research is that individual corruption cases are rarely being studied; the identified causes, therefore, are not *triggering* but most often *predisposing*. This makes it difficult to explain corruption.

### 3. Theories of the causes of corruption

Taking these remarks as a departing point, in the following chapters we will seek to identify different theories and schools of thought and analysis (which can but do not necessarily map to disciplines) to understand their way of conceptualizing the causes of corruption. Having mentioned the problem of defining the explanandum in the beginning of this chapter, which *is* the cause of corruption, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the *theories* of the causes of corruption. How are causes of corruption theoretically framed? Understanding how different theories define, conceptualize, and eventually deduce policy recommendations will amplify our understanding of the complexity of corruption and illustrate the spectrum of possibilities to deal with it analytically as well as practically.

Corruption is a much-debated subject in both popular and in scientific discourses (see for example Heidenheimer/Johnston/LeVine 1989). Relevant research from a variety of scientific disciplines by a variety of scholars has steadily accelerated in the last decade. The economic approach (e.g. Kaufmann/Kraay/Zoido-Lobaton 2000; Klitgaard 1991; Lambsdorff 2007; Rose-Ackerman 1978, 1999, 2006; Treisman 2000) is arguably the most dominant but certainly not the only scientific discourse on corruption.

A glance at the growing number of different scientific studies on corruption leads to more questions than answers. Confusion exists in the literature even *within* specific scientific disciplines. Which anti-corruption methods work best under what circumstances? The answer is equivocal. It seems that the theoretical model chosen to research corruption largely determines the direction of the proposed solutions. Different causal chains lead to different discourses on corruption prevention and control. Problems with comparisons of the different perspectives and attempts to come to an accumulated body of knowledge are hampered by the sometimes very different theoretical underpinnings. Confusion starts with the perspectives using different conceptualizations of corruption. Our motivations for this book stem from a need to help clear the confusion and the hope of uncovering less prominent theories of the causes of corruption. ‘Outmoded’ conceptions of the causes of corruption may help amplify the analytical and policy spectra, informing parties in both domains.

The main question of this book is: *how are the causes of corruption studied?* The more we know about the causes of corruption, the better we can choose the policy instruments to combat it. The more we know about the policy instruments (dominantly) used and recommended the more we need to know about the underlying *conceptions* of the causes of corruption.

The book presents the state of the art in a comparative study of the causes of corruption. Different authors in the field of corruption analysis from different schools of thought shed light on the issue of corruption from different theoretical perspectives. Corruption is currently studied within *different disciplines* and from different theoretical perspectives (Alemann 2005). Criminology, sociology, philosophy, public administration, economics, political science, history, and psychology, for example, may have within them a rather narrow set of theories and research methods that do not communicate well with each other. Part of the problem seems to be the different conceptual and theoretical starting points of the disciplines, leading to a ‘dialogue of the deaf’. By making these differences explicit, *The Good Cause* will further the important project of making the different corruption discourses intelligible to each other within academia. Obviously, certain theoretical perspectives enjoy at a certain place and time more prominence than others. This book aims to emphasize that (1) each theory has its strengths and weaknesses, and (2) the most prominent or hegemonious theory in practice and academia (such as the economics of corruption in the last twenty years) is not necessarily the analytically strongest or most useful one. Taking account of the (dis)advantages of different theoretical perspectives, such as structural functionalist theory, new institutional economics of corruption, criminological, postmodern, and systems theories, and others could therefore help analysts as well as practitioners be aware of the blind spots in developing policies to fight corruption and push researchers towards *interconceptual* analysis. *The Good Cause* takes into perspective what has been done so far in conceptualizing and em-

pirically studying the causes of corruption and what needs to be done in the future.

#### 4. Academic corruption discourses

The variety of scholarly disciplines within which corruption is studied results in several academic discourses. Hoetjes (1977), a scholar studying development administration, distinguishes four such clusters of corruption theories: Weberian ideal-typical, structural functionalist, institutional economics, and ecological. Since Hoetjes's dissertation on corruption in India, however, other academic corruption discourses have come into being. To the four clusters we therefore add system theoretical, institutional design, post-positivist, and criminological perspectives. Let us briefly introduce the eight perspectives.

1. The *Weberian-idealtypical* approach (see Rubinstein/von Maravić, chapter 2) sees corruption as a lack of rationalization of the public service. To its proponents it is a phase on the route from patrimonialism to rational legal authority (Hoetjes 1977: 53-55; Hoetjes 1982: 65-67; see e.g. Rubinstein 1983). Loopholes exist in the not fully developed bureaucratic system for corrupt acts to occur.
2. The *structural functionalist* approach (see de Zwart, chapter 3) looks at society as a collection of coherent systems in which all societal phenomena have a function. Structural functionalist-inspired scholars therefore ask themselves which function corruption fulfills in a certain society (Hoetjes 1977: 55-57; Hoetjes 1982: 67-69). 'Brokerage', for example, is such a function when corrupt officials facilitate action between the central and the local levels (Blockmans 1988; Campbell 1989: 334; Huiskamp 1991, 1995). Corruption can serve to tone down unduly harsh laws (McFarlane 1996: 58-59) or provide protection and influence for social groups with material wealth but little or no political power (Waquet 1992: 62). The most elaborate example of a structural functionalist approach to corruption can be found in Fred Riggs's theory of the prismatic society (Riggs 1964).
3. Adherents of the *institutional economics* approach (see Rose-Ackerman, chapter 4) see corrupt officials as rational utility maximizers who simply take the most profitable course of action (Hoetjes 1977: 57-60; Hoetjes 1982: 69-71; Klitgaard 1991; Lambsdorff 2007; Rose-Ackerman 1978). Rose-Ackerman says of this style of analysis, '[i]n a study of corruption, one can make substantial progress with models that take tastes and values as given and perceive individuals as rational beings attempting to further their own self-interest in a world of scarce resources' (Rose-Ackerman 1978: 4). Rose-Ackerman's work on the causes of corruption within or-

ganizations gives us a first idea for exploring the topic. Her conclusion is that each organizational structure is vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous officials but the structures vary with respect to the *locus* of corruption (1993: 817). Rose-Ackerman argues that the structure of the bureaucracy determines the discretionary power of an actor and the expected costs of accepting a bribe (1993: 803). As new forms of administrative systems emerge, the question of where to identify potential risks of corruption in the systems is relevant to a better understanding of the situation. The institutional economics approach consists of several sub-theories and -streams such as rent-seeking and transaction cost theory (e.g. Lambsdorff 2002a, b).

4. The *ecological approach* involves combining micro, meso, and macro levels of corruption research. Mackie's (1985) INUS (Insufficient but Necessary part of an Unnecessary but Sufficient) conditions play an important role in this approach. Huberts introduces a similar concept in the *multi-approach* (see Huberts, chapter 9).
5. *System theory* is Niklas Luhmann's (cf. Brans/Roszbach 1997) approach to corruption (see Hiller, chapter 5). Society is divided into separate, self-referential, autopoietic value systems. Corruption results from overlapping systems, for instance, when values from the economic system penetrate the legal or political system (Luhmann 1995a), resulting in the abuse of another system's logic ('Sinnlogik'; Hiller 2005: 61).
6. Adherents of the *institutional design* of political systems (e.g. Gering/Thacker 2004; Johnston 2005; Kunicova/Rose-Ackerman 2005; Manow 2005) approach believe that institutions shape behavior and that therefore some political systems are more prone to corruption than others (see Peters, chapter 6).<sup>1</sup> The study of the link between political institutions and ergo-political governance arrangements and corruption emphasizes the different impact of types of political systems. The core theoretical concept is grounded in the assumption of political competition, which

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1 Unlike interest-based theories, *neo-institutional theories* emphasize the embeddedness of individual preferences and action in collective social settings (DiMaggio/Powell 1991: 11; Goodin 1996: 7). Individual behavior is shaped by rules, symbols, routines, norms, scripts, and templates (Hall/Taylor 1996: 15). Institutions therefore make behavior predictable by mitigating ambiguity and unpredictability in complex and dynamic social settings (March/Olsen 1989: 22-24). Actors follow rules they consider legitimate, i.e., those that have a shared understanding of what is right, true, reasonable, and good. Seeking identity or fulfilling the expectations and obligations "encapsulated in a role" (March/Olsen 2006: 689) is a central element in this theory. Instead of calculating the net benefit of alternative options, conformity or the logic of appropriateness explains decisions. Not consequence, likelihood, or value matter but "criteria of similarity and congruence" (March/Olsen 2006: 690). To act appropriately simply means to act in accordance with institutionalized practices of a collective. Corruption or deviance from accepted norms and standards occurs when institutions do not fulfill this "sense-making" function and therefore create uncertainty and disorder; the "aggregative" institution (March/Olsen 1989: 118, 137) itself starts to propagate to maximize the net benefit of alternative options.

emphasizes the ideal of elections as sufficient means of control and accountability. Such an analytical perspective seeks to explore disparate causal mechanisms such as openness and transparency, party competition, decision-making rules, or collective action problems. It often tries to explain political corruption with deficits of competition. Are parliamentary democracies more prone to corruption than presidential ones, or do unitary systems lead to lower levels of corruption than federal systems?

7. The *post-positivist* approach focuses on how corruption is socially constructed (de Graaf/Wagenaar/Hoenderboom, chapter 7). The American political scientist Michael Johnston has defined corruption as ‘the abuse, according to the legal or social standards constituting a society’s system of public order, of a public role or resource for private benefit’ (Johnston 1996: 331-334). He invites us to investigate how the content of notions of abuse, public role, and private benefit are contested in specific places and at specific times. Johnston is interested in finding out how clashes over the boundaries between public and private, politics and administration, institutions and sources of power, state and society, private and collective interests, and the allocative limits of the market develop, because it is precisely during such conflicts that concepts such as integrity and corruption acquire their meaning (Johnston 1996). From such a cultural or constructivist perspective, corruption manifests as a specific type of social relationship. Its social meaning must be understood with reference to its social setting (Sissener 2001). Consequently, the meaning of deviancy varies from society to society and throughout history. There is neither a universal understanding of corruption (or nepotism or deviancy) nor are the phenomena grounded in the dark side of humans. Instead they represent social mechanisms to achieve solidarity between and within kinship groups (Tänzler 2007). According to this understanding, focusing on the perceptions of corruption reveals the social construction of reality. Empirical research therefore emphasizes the importance of narratives and arguments in understanding the subjective perspective of reality.
8. Those who take the *criminological* approach (Huisman/Vande Walle, chapter 8) are interested in individual corrupt officials and apply criminological theories to them. De Graaf and Huberts (2008) studied ten Dutch corruption cases and drew attention to the importance of the psychological make-up of the perpetrators involved. Corrupt officials in the Netherlands, it turns out, are often highly popular with their colleagues because of their openness and flair, and especially their ability to ‘get things done’. They are usually males, whose orientation to problem solving rather than problem creating tends to make them valuable to their organizations. Yet it is precisely their unorthodox, results-oriented mode of operation that makes them cross the thin line between laudable and lamentable behavior.



*The Good Cause* is structured to allow the variously schooled authors to introduce you to their particular perspectives. They discuss the definition and models used within them, give examples of empirical studies, describe their research methods (for example, quantitative or qualitative), and evaluate their inherent strengths and weaknesses. Last, the authors review the perspectives' empirical insights to show what they add to the discussion at hand: the *question* of what causes corruption.